

## CONVERSATION WITH SOPHIE WHETTALL

*The exhibition at CENTRALE offers a dialogue between your works and that of internationally renowned artist Etel Adnan. Why did you choose to invite this artist?*

Originally, when Carine Fol offered to show my works at CENTRALE and asked me to invite an artist, only one name sprung to my mind: Etel Adnan.

I discovered Etel Adnan around ten years ago at the Galleria Continua, with which I also work. I was struck by the gap between her work, and the world and today's reality. On the other hand, by the contemporaneousness of her work, knowing that she was over ninety.

On the other hand, we both regularly broach landscapes and I feel that the way in which we approach it can produce a surprising dialogue and that we can enrich one another. Moreover, in our respective work, the art piece brings a questioning that goes beyond the mere reproduction of what spectators see. Ultimately, the landscape is a medium that we will both present using our own intimacy, our own multiplicity.

Furthermore, I started reading Etel's texts and inevitably found myself in her words... It's amazing.

Finally, there is a palpable intimacy in our works as well as something very universal, since the landscape is a common theme. The way in which Etel presents it is very accessible, her works have an aesthetic, a strength in the colours and a light that can also be found in my pieces.

This being said, our works remain very different, and this duo may surprise some visitors. At the same time, I think that our minds meet in numerous ways.

*La banquise, la forêt et les étoiles (The ice sea, forests and stars). This is the somewhat enigmatic title of your exhibition at CENTRALE. Could you explain it?*

There were many other titles before this one. I was trying to find one that could encompass all the pieces presented in this show. By working on the exhibition and deconstructing the space before putting it back together again, I ended up simplifying the whole. I built a scale model and then I installed the works. By installing them, the title *appeared*. That's exactly what happened. I decided to make an intervention *in situ* with new pieces in the central space of CENTRALE, and to give this space the same name as the exhibit. What I do in this space: a forest, an ice sea, and stars.

*The exhibition is designed as a stroll through various immersive ambiances. Can you tell us about these different atmospheres?*

I like to test myself and thereby test visitors.

Very often, my work stems from my intimacy. The idea consists in starting from myself to create a cathartic atmosphere in a way that the public can interact with their own intimacy.

This being said, there are many different ambiances. It may not be an easy exhibition for visitors, insofar as they will be pulled apart in different directions. There are places of tranquility, observation, introspection, and there are also places for confrontation. For me, it is a metaphor of life.

We are constantly confronted to different situations, different forces – whether political or social – and somehow, I play with all that.

In the beginning, Carine Fol and I gave a lot of thought to the circulation of visitors inside the exhibition.

I mostly create video installations so I decided to start the exhibition with a video. So, the tour starts with an installation that I created as a homage to African women and that bears the title *Les Porteuses*, a universal work, open to the world. The exhibition ends with a video installation that also broaches the subject of women, but in more personal way. We switch from macro to micro.

In a first while, there are universal and general questions about the world and then, we move to a certain intimacy.

It is important to note that we cross the dark video spaces to go to the glaring light of the central space, which is the heart of the show. It will consist of *in situ* works created for the location, related to the location and its origins as a former electric plant. In this space, the relationship to light - which is ever present in my work - will show through an installation of kites or stars, a forest and an ice sea. A meditative and contemplative oeuvre.

*You are showing new works during this show at CENTRALE. Did the building, a former electric plant, inspired you? If so, how?*

I had the chance of seeing several exhibitions at CENTRALE, and starting from what I saw, i.e., a fragmented space, I had the intention, the intuition, the desire and want to find myself in the raw space, to give it back its origins to enter in a relationship with its brutality.

Responding to Carine's invitation, I decided to initiate a sort of experimental laboratory in the central space, not just showing the work that I already realised and with which I enjoy a more intimate connection. I wanted to challenge myself and dare something new.

To this day I'm not sure if it's going to work. I'll find out when I set up, since the space is very complex. But somehow - and this proves recurrent in my work - there is a risk taken in relation with the installation. I wanted to take risks, to remove myself from reassurances. If I don't do this today, then when?

*By your own admission, your work contributes to a form of autobiographic unveiling. How do you experience the sharing of your intimacy with visitors? What message would you like to convey to visitors?*

I use myself as a raw material. But the idea is that, starting from my own experiences and reflections, I invite spectators to confront their own experiences and reflections.

Starting from my intimacy, I - humbly - hope to give them the occasion to be in touch with their inner selves, or to confront deeper grey areas that we rarely challenge in today's society.

My work often floats over this notion of confrontation, self-confrontation and confrontation with the world. When I speak of intimacy, you mustn't think that I unveil my private life, but rather, that I share marks of personality such as softness, violence - as in *Shadow Boxing* (video where a professional boxer trains face to the motionless artist) going beyond oneself, our limits, to access a personal freedom and that I want to share with the spectators throughout the show.

It's all about coming out of your comfort zone. As an artist, I think that it is fundamental: I need to push doors and to come out of my comfort zone.

*What is your favourite work in this exhibition?*

Today, I'd say the forest: an installation of a dozen Carolina Pine wood panels measuring 122 x 244, which are placed on their own, in diptychs or triptychs. The motif of the wood is pierced with millions of little holes that redraw or highlight the drawing of the timber.

These panels will be placed behind one another to recreate the piercing of light through these holes, in the same way as in a densely sunlit Belgian forest.

I'm very happy to divert a purely industrial object to something inherently poetic.

Interviewed in January 2019 by Estelle Vandeweege (CENTRALE)